The summer I will never forget

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1

It was the hottest day I’ve ever experienced in my life. I covered my head with a cap and sought shade under our old cherry tree, looking for some protection from the unbearable sun.
My beloved grandma was going about her daily activities—watering beds in our vegetable garden and giving orders to my grandpa, who was already overwhelmed enough by this super sunny day.
"No way. I’m off. I think I’ve watered enough beds, haven’t I?"
His forehead was covered with tiny drops of sweat, and he seemed about to resign himself from such an ungrateful task.
"Hold on. There are two more beds that need watering," my grandmother pointed out to him.
As a child, I was mesmerised, watching her work.
"Is there anything I can assist you with, Grandma?" my lazy question sounded more like a request to be excused from helping altogether.
"Yes, please, sweetheart! But it seems to me that you’re feeling hungry, aren’t you?"
"Anyway, you can go into the house and look for a snack if you want. Help yourself."

After saying this, she returned to her recent occupation—cuddling with my grandpa, piling him with as many tasks as possible. I've never understood why she seemed to take care of her grandson more than her own husband.

I entered the house spontaneously, looking for the first thing that could have pretended to be a snack. I've never understood why my grandma was so reserved with her feelings toward my grandpa. Since we got our little garden in the country, she has become more obsessed with planting more flowers and trees in it and less tender with Grandpa. Or maybe it only seemed that way to me. Certainly, she was not.

According to my childish perception of such a huge and unexplainable world, everything that has happened in our dacha these days reminded me of how many things I still have to learn, and made me realize not to take my own suspicions about my grandparents too seriously.

A long time ago, my grandma used to read her garden books all the time when she was indoors. But since we got this countryside garden, things have started to get worse. She stopped reading me her night fairy tales and preferred to stay outside until midnight, just watering the garden beds and looking after her peonies as if they were her own children.

I also knew that she was in absolute love with her small babies—what she used to call her flowers. She also adored roses and chrysanthemums, which were her favorites.

As it turned out, she spent every single summer in her (as she used to call it) paradise possessions, taking full advantage of nature, which was her only remedy to feel better.
We almost managed to complete our garden endeavors, and I was sitting next to my grandpa, sniffing the air like a curious puppy, trying to catch every single smell of our neighbor’s barbecue spreading around.
Listen! I turned to my grandpa, hugging him for his warm shoulders and looking into his blue eyes that reminded me of a clear sky with no clouds.
What is the matter, my boy? my grandpa asked, giving me a hug in return and remaining silent.
Nothing… I said, shifting my gaze from his eyes to the sunset, which had only just begun to show itself.

2

At sunrise, I loved listening to the earliest birds, whose sweet voices broke into our dacha like a cascade of green waterfalls, capturing our household in their possession. Then my grandpa's grunting signaled his willingness to stay in bed for five more minutes. After that, we planned to go out to the nearby forest to look for a dozen tasty and strong mushrooms in the fresh grass covered with morning dew.
The grass looked unwavering, as if it had been watching its last dreams, and the quiet that tenderly flowed through the branches of the trees, gently waking them

up, filling the space with many magnificent flavors that captivated two strangers' attention—who had just entered here, mesmerized, staring at this green morning fairy tale. Having our feelings mixed and not being able to clearly express exactly what we felt, my Grandpa and I simply watched the early morning birds' holiday, a time that was ready to make everyone who had already entered this place joyful, full of grace, and open to confess all their sins to the forest.

"Can you hear it?" my Grandpa asked, giving me a tender hug and groaning once more, just as he always did during moments that brought him much delight.

"What?" I replied. "All I hear are the birds jumping from one branch to another, trying to make as much impression as possible on us."

"No... You can't figure out what I'm about to say," he said.

He pointed with his index finger toward a small blue patch of sky hanging between two large oak branches, which looked at us with a sunny smile, as if it were a crystal lake shimmering in the air.

"Splendid! Isn’t it?" My Grandpa nodded in surprise, refusing to believe the reality surrounding us since we arrived. To our delight, we also discovered two large mushrooms growing beneath our feet.

"We've just made two more friends here!" he exclaimed joyfully, leaning with his pocket knife toward the warm-smelling ground to carefully cut the mushrooms by their

roots. Then, he placed the two lucky ones into his basket, which he held in his right hand.
"Done! Very well! Now we can move forward to discover more friends here!" He looked entirely happy, as if in that moment he had been granted all the treasures of the world.

3

Our countryside life seemed to us an endless miracle, strongly connected to our daily walks in the forests, visiting our beloved shore, swimming in the river, and sharing our happiness that only grew each day.
My Grandpa seemed to me a strong rock in an open space that couldn’t be moved by anyone, including my Grandma.
Every single morning, while I was still having my last dreams and trying to make those moments last a little longer, my Grandpa was already on his feet, standing near the stove, mixing his beloved mushrooms with a spoon and whistling his favorite song melody.
"Ta ra ra ra ra… Oh… my favorite dark-cherry scarf…"
At these moments, the whole dacha was filled with the forest flavors wafting into our house. It was an incredible, breathtaking summer story that embraced us with its sunny arms! We were completely immersed in this friendly atmosphere, dreaming that it would last forever. My Grandma, the best hostess in the world,

looked after us as if we were two newborn babies, unable to take care of ourselves.
"What a mess! Look at this!" The same words echoed in my ears every morning when my Grandma would get angry about my Grandpa's cooking.
"Clear this place immediately, or I'll throw your mushrooms away!"
"Okay. I will. Please don't be so noisy, or you might wake Sereja..." My Grandpa was trying to protest, and at that moment, he didn't seem to me like the sturdy rock I had seen him as before.
All my previous expectations of his unquestionable greatness were instantly shattered the moment she said it. The legends of his stoicism that had captivated my mind before were destroyed in an instant.
"I've already gotten up! No worries," I said as I entered the kitchen, first hugging my Grandma, then my Grandpa, before checking our morning menu.
A fresh portion of mushrooms seemed to me the perfect way to start my morning and to be filled with enough energy for the whole day.
"So, pour the water into the washstand and wash your hands, then we'll start breakfast!" said Grandpa. I immediately ran outside (our washstand was right there) to happily greet a new day!

There was a little dog following my Grandpa's footsteps every time we walked around our neighborhood. At that moment, my Grandpa seemed to me like a person walking among his possessions. This little dog might scare all the local cats hunting for mice, as she barked at any shadow she encountered.
We called her tenderly "Our Little Guard" for her sincere loyalty, demonstrated through her unwavering devotion to my Grandpa, whom she regarded as her only friend in the whole world.
She used to keep us good company all the way since the moment we came up against it. Her tiny, laughing eyes watched my Grandpa admirably, as if he were a great sailor standing at the steering wheel, guiding our pirate ship called Life across the Atlantic Ocean.
Our days were passing calmly, serenely full of genuine happiness and joy. The green tree branches greeted us friendly, giving us a profound shade to keep us cool. Neither my Grandpa nor I, nor even our little four-legged friend, knew what a great time we had just being all together in this awakening, fresh-smelling forest, like a lime tree in July.
Each single path led us to new adventures through the thickets of wild bushes growing here and there, which kept their silence unless a stranger’s foot came here. Suddenly, we came face to face with a little serpent that quickly crossed the path and looked scared upon seeing three strangers in front of it.

"Wow… Is it poisoned?" exclaimed I, jumping backward and getting ready to flee.
"No… don’t be scared of it!" my Grandpa held my hand. "They don’t bite. It’s a grass snake. It can’t harm you. Be sure that this little one gets scared of you too," he laughed.
"Oh… thank God!" I exhaled and smiled.
"Actually, I’m not… I mean… I’m not afraid of it at all," I tried to look brave in front of Grandpa.
"I know… You are my boy!" he gently stroked my head.

5

At times, my little nine-year-old cousin joined us, and then we all enjoyed ourselves happily, including our little four-legged friend, who followed our footsteps, accompanying us with its loud barking wherever we went.
My cousin is called Lena, and she used to demand all my spare time for herself. Much to her delight, I was always nearby, ready to play or pick berries from our cherry trees to provide her with our local dessert. Then we usually went down to our neighborhood's dachas, picking and tasting cherries that hung down from their brightly painted fences. We also loved vying with each other to bombard our Grandpa with all kinds of questions, watching his reaction, and laughing out loud if our childish, nonsensical questions had an effect on him.

"Enough kids! I've said enough... Everything has its limits, and my patience is not infinite," Grandpa used to say when the situation went out of control. And our four-legged friend used to bark at us while standing by my Grandpa's side, as if she were the smartest animal on planet Earth—understanding our human language and able to maintain eye contact with us.

My cousin loved to invent stories on the go, where she saw us as characters coming out of the world of video games or her dark, scary stories for kids.

To be honest, I've never understood her passion for such things, which seemed too weird and inappropriate for her age.

Remembering the very first time she took up learning to swim, her attempts to prove herself in new studies looked simultaneously failed and rather helpless rather than funny.

First, she was dropped into the water like a screeching puppy catching air by mouth and trying to hold herself on the water's surface as long as possible.

"Try it again!" she was constantly cheered on by our Grandpa, standing nearby and laughing at her helpless movements as she tried to keep swimming, pretending to be a small fish in the ocean.

The sun's glare illuminated the water like brilliant stars, swaying and reflecting in our happy eyes. Then, we all lay down on the grass, gazing dreamily into the sky, listening to our Grandpa's stories, which he seemed to invent on the spot.

My cousin and I both admired his kindness and childish enthusiasm, which made him look even more like us when he told his stories. The nearby field was filled with spicy aromas that wafted around, taking our breath away with their authentic flavors—flavors that seemed to us like those of Paradise.

6

The next morning, my Grandma entrusted us three with watering the garden beds. My cousin grabbed her watering can filled with water and hurried forward like a tank to the spot where I stood. The nearby bushes crackled loudly with her steps, which she pretended were the massive steps of a bear—though they certainly weren’t her cousin’s.

"Easy! You'll break them all that way!" I protested, trying to explain to her that there’s a better way to do it without damaging the plants. My Grandma nodded approvingly at me, as if she agreed with my point of view rather than with my cousin’s.

We split up. I took all the beds near the fence under the scorching sun—actually, it wasn’t my idea, but my cousin’s, to spot me there—while Lena watered the beds from the shade of the apple tree, waving at me with a smile.

"Go on. Go on. I’m busy enjoying my apple. Would you like some?" she said, dropping an apple core over the

fence onto our neighbor’s yard. She did everything to test my patience—that’s what I thought at the time. Feeling annoyed from doing nothing, she soon came up to me and conspiratorially smiled.
"Let’s water all the beds quickly and then go swimming!" my cousin blurted out unexpectedly, plucking one more cherry from the tree.
"Okay. You’ve won. Let’s have a snack."
The sun splashed its light everywhere, laughing out loud and painting freckles on my cousin’s cheeks with its warm rays.
We left our garden beds, half-watered and half-scorched by the sun, and entered the dacha to find something to eat, while our grandparents swayed their heads and watered our abandoned beds.

7

Next morning, we had plans to go for a walk in the nearby forest and maybe find a dozen strong honey mushrooms. The weather had promised to be great, and all three of us felt excited about our little adventure. I took my backpack, my cousin brought her small bucket to collect some flowers, Grandpa looked at us attentively, checking that we were ready to go, and finally, we left.
The forest greeted us with its birds' songs wafting through all parts of the place. The morning dew

shimmered here and there with various colors, inviting three strangers to discover this magnificent world!

Finally, we found some hazel trees full of nuts, hanging down heavily and promising us a great harvest to pick.

"Wow, such a great moment, kids!" exclaimed Grandpa, rolling up his sleeves and getting ready to get to work.

We started picking up the nuts, stuffing our pockets with them.

In a few minutes, the hazel bush was nearly empty, and my cousin and I sat in the shade, eating our nuts. Some of them tasted unmature, and I spat them into the grass.

"Don’t spit on the grass! It’s not a good habit!" said Grandpa, whistling one of his favorite songs simultaneously.

" Ok. I got it..." I turned to my cousin who was sitting and watching me conspiratorially.

"What are you up to?" I asked her sitting nearby.

"Let s hide from Grandpa in the near bush...

No. I don t think that it s a good idea..."protested I.

"Come on... just for five minutes while Grandpa is getting busy looking for more nuts."

After a short persuasion, I agreed, and we hid in the bushes, patiently waiting for our Grandpa’s reaction. For the first ten minutes, he seemingly couldn’t notice our absence, going on with whistling and enjoying his work. But very soon, he decided to call me:

"Sereja! Come and see how many nuts I got here!"

We didn’t move and stayed silent.
"Sereja! Can you hear me?"
"Sereja, Lena, where are you?"
We still remained quiet, but I started feeling bad about our silly idea to hide here in these thorny bushes. My cousin, however, remained curious and intrigued.
In the next few seconds, our Grandpa’s face completely changed, looking paler. He drooped the basket on the ground and dashed back and forth, trying to find us. He looked really frightened and lost at the same time.
I couldn’t stay quiet any longer, and although my cousin was angry about my decision to show ourselves, I raised my head first.
"We are here, Grandpa! We just played..." I rushed toward him, and my cousin followed.
"Thank God!"—that’s all Grandpa could say, hugging us with tears in his eyes.
"I thought I had already lost you,"
I had never seen my Grandpa cry before.

8

It rained heavily the whole day and my cousin and me had no idea what kind of things we could amuse ourselves with. I was hanging around back and forth trying to invent a breathtaking short story to amuse Lena who was sitting in the porch watching the big drops of rain falling down heavily and smashing their fragile bodies about the near stand apple-tree s leaves.

"Such a boring day… Isn’t it?" she yawned lazily and began drumming her index finger on the porch pillar, trying to distract herself from the rainy weather that seemed like it would never end for the whole day.
"Great! I think I’d rather sleep than sit here listening to this noise." She suddenly stood up and went back inside, searching for some kind of amusement. I stayed on the porch, gazing at our apple tree, which to me looked like a beautiful princess full of tears.
Our grandparents had already woken up and returned to their daily routines. Grandma was cuddling with Grandpa as usual, pointing out the numerous things he had been tasked with doing.
"Hurry up! Have you managed to put the bucket out to collect this rainy water? This water will come in handy for my little plants. Hopefully, tomorrow won’t be rainy, so we can gather enough of this living water. I want all our buckets to be filled." She tied her scarf as she usually did and went outside, brave against the crazy rain.
"Grandma, you can get cold out there!" I yelled, but she didn’t hear me. I returned inside the dacha and lay down on my bed, whistling one of my favorite songs. I did it mostly with mixed feelings about what the coming day might bring.
"Don’t whistle! I don’t like it! Besides, you won’t make any money doing that," Lena said, looking at me angrily and yawning twice.

"Is it just boring? Who told you that whistling can make you poor?" I tried to be clear with my cousin. She often expressed her insights in the wrong way.
"Guys, breakfast is ready! If you don’t hurry, it’ll get cold," Grandpa’s voice called from the doorway, inviting us to join him in the kitchen.

"And what about Grandma?" I asked. "Will she join us?"

"I think she’s already eaten," he replied. She couldn’t wait to get back to tending all the plants in our garden. Then he placed a steaming frying pan, filled with a dozen honey mushrooms, on the table covered with a flower-print tablecloth. The aroma was delicious, making us even hungrier, as it carried all the rich flavors of the forest.

9

The sunset was breathtaking, and we sat mesmerized, gazing attractively at the last rays of the sun touching our porch and the nearby apple tree.

My grandparents were sitting shoulder to shoulder, discussing their morning plans and trying to fill as many water beds as possible within the next two hours. My cousin and I remained indifferent to their talk, as we had our own plans to go swimming and then return to reading a captivating book that we started last night.

The bees were buzzing around, making us pay attention to them.
"Oh, come on... Are you not going to sting me, baby, are you?" my grandpa waved away our yellow guests and their insistent buzzing, then turned back to Grandma to continue their conversation.
"I've learned enough to swim, so I bet I can beat you in our competition," my cousin said, clearly overestimating her swimming skills. But I didn’t mind.

I turned my apple core over and threw it over the fence.

"So, what was the outcome of that pioneer boy?" I asked Lena dully, not expecting to get any clear explanation from her.

I guess he was supposed to be lost in that wild forest. And I don’t care if he’s alive the next morning... I’ve been more intrigued by the second storyline, where that pioneer boy’s abandoned puppy is going to survive for the next three days without any food.

"And his cat. Don’t forget... He owned the cat too," I added.

"Well, actually, they’ll be okay if they find a way to get outside. Animals are smarter and more adaptable to this life than people. I’ve just been curious about one thing that didn’t let me sleep well last night..." I said sarcastically, looking at Lena.

"What thing?" Her eyes were wide open, full of surprise.

"Hope that these animals haven’t eaten each other yet, having any piece of food..." I smiled ironically.

"Fool! Don’t say such things..." Lena stood up and went back into the house.

I stayed with my grandparents, listening carefully to their conversation and exposing my smiling face to the shining morning sun.

"What are you messing around for, Sereja? Let’s go back to work! There are twenty more beds that need watering." My grandpa stood up and went to the barn to get all the necessary tools for me to perform my tasks.

"Great! Lena may do nothing while I work hard here..."

I took my watering can, filled it with water, and started watering while dully whistling one of my favorite songs. I was near the open window when I immediately heard my cousin’s voice:

"Don’t whistle! You’ll have no money!"

10

Three days later, I accidentally twisted my ankle and had to stay indoors, amusing my cousin, who seemed to take too much delight in torturing me with her unbearable jokes.

"Now you're in bed... and I can do whatever I want, and you can't control me anymore. Enjoy your time reading your boring book..." she said. She left the room and went

out to relax in our flourishing garden. I turned the page, trying to immerse myself back into the story of my beloved characters, though my twisted ankle kept bringing me back to reality.
My book was beautifully illustrated with captivating pictures, and the story about two friends who fell in love with a capricious girl seemed to make her so happy, watching the competition between the two for her heart. It reminded me of the mutual pleasure my cousin derived from watching me lie in my bed.

I couldn't take it anymore and knew I had to try something to bring myself back to my usual activity. But how? Any attempt to stand up from my bed was thwarted by a piercing pain in my ankle. After a dozen tries, I hopelessly lay back down and exhaled deeply. The annoying fly had reached my nose and was preparing to attack.
"Not this time, honey," I muttered, trying to blow the persistent insect away. But instead of retreating, it only pursued me more insistently.
The sun was teasing me with its first glimmers dancing on the wall, drawing me in like a sunny rabbit hopping up and down, like a shiny crystal ball. The weather was perfect for inspecting my unwatered garden beds and lending a hand to my grandparents. Their voices drifted in from outside, making me feel a bit useless that day.

"Great! I'm chained to my room now, reading this boring book. What a story! Just about two silly fellows following

a mermaid who’s setting her nets for their hearts. Who exactly bought this book? My grandparents were never curious about such stories; they remained loyal to their garden beds and watering plants." I closed the book, feeling sufficiently bored, and effortlessly drifted off to sleep.

In my dream, I saw Lena dressed elegantly, jumping from one chamomile to another as if she were a little princess from an old, forgotten fairy tale. As she hopped, I gradually felt my breath becoming shallower, my vision fading, and I hopelessly struggled for air… The very familiar voice I used to hear all the time seeped into my dream…

"Time to wake up!" I suddenly opened my eyes. And guess who I saw? It was Lena, poking a chamomile into my nose in her numerous attempts to wake me.

11

The spring murmured calmly, running over the little stones engraved in the clayey soil. My grandpa put the bucket under the murmuring stream and sat down on the old bench, looking around pensively.
"The autumn is near… Look at these yellow leaves… They are about to fall down… It’s all the same as what happens in our lives. Some are getting older, while others are just beginning their journey, like green, fresh plants

making their way through the sun." He took off his cap and put it on his knees. My cousin and I looked at him thoughtfully as well and remained quiet. We weren't interested in such great philosophy at that time. It seemed to us something that was said abstractly and didn't concern us at all.
"And why are you comparing us to green plants?" my cousin protested unexpectedly. "We are not those green ones." She leaned over the bucket full of water, trying to place the yellow leaf, which she had cut from a nearby birch, onto the water. The water was glistening in the sunshine, and everyone watching could see how clear it was.
I looked at our Grandpa. He had already stepped away from the bench and was making his way to the familiar oak tree to greet it. He used to spend five or more minutes nearby, just embracing the tree and nourishing his body with its energy. It charged him with strength and positivity.
Meanwhile, some leaves continued to fall, spinning around in the shiny, clear, and brilliant air.

12

The next morning, my Grandma assigned us chores in the garden beds. The plants needed to be watered sufficiently. We ran around with watering buckets, bumping into each other along the way. Some buzzing bees followed us, cheering us up with their lively buzzing.

"Do you like playing as this yellow character?" my cousin kept asking me about the video game she loved to play while we were in the city.
"He seems so unbeatable and quick..." she insisted, waiting eagerly for my answer.
"I don't care how powerful he is until we finish watering our beds," I said, trying not to pay attention to such silly questions.

We kept working diligently, and within an hour, the task was complete. The sun was scorching unmercifully, and we decided to hide on the porch. Lena took out her coloring book and a couple of pencils and started coloring.
"You know what?" I began, trying to amuse her with my new idea. "I think I know how we can play your favorite video game right here." She turned to me, completely surprised, her eyes still bright with interest, eager to hear what I was going to say.
"But how is that supposed to work without our video console here?" she stared at me as if I were an alien from another planet, sharing my idea. Bam! Bam! Two pears fell from the tree, making us both stop and listen.
"Let’s have some rest from your crazy ideas!" I looked at her instantly, then stood up and made my way into our dacha.
"Hold on! Listen to me carefully." She followed me patiently, which didn’t seem familiar to me. She definitely plotted something very intriguing.

An hour later, we sat on the floor, diligently drawing her favorite video game characters using only three broken, colorful pencils. She tried to make her characters look better than mine. Even here, she did her best, pretending to be a great painter seeking admission and world fame.
"My dragon's tail looks brighter than yours. And my enchanted princess too. And I’m more experienced in drawing than you," she declared, even jumping up to admire her sudden masterpiece. My patience ran out, and I grew bored of her spontaneous remarks.
"Why don’t you draw a different character, like a fox, for example?"
"She stared at me dully, as if I were advising her to jump from the high bank into the cold river."
"What? Did I say something silly?" I gazed at her, trying to figure out what made her lose her fun.
"Nothing… You always make me angry while I’m painting."
She threw her album, stood up, and approached the door. "I'm going out. Enjoy your loneliness."
She slammed the door, and the last thing I managed to hear were her quick steps down the porch.

13

The fall was near, and the leaves were turning yellow, changing their colors to more shiny and bright tones, illuminating the air. My cousin and I stood next to the birch, which seemed to be cuddling with the wind, its

branches crawling across the blue sky. At that moment, it was supposed to look like a drunk woman waving her hands, regretting her past.
We followed the path as it changed directions repeatedly. At one point, we got scared, thinking we might be lost. Lena looked at me with panic in her eyes.
"What are we going to do next? How will we get out of here? Any ideas?" Her face turned red, and I started to feel nervous too.
"Okay, don't panic. I know we're out of the right direction, but the sun is still up, and that means we'll keep following it until we reach the exit from this dark forest..."
I encouraged her to think positively, just like my Grandpa always taught me.
"Just follow me, and I'll show you the way out..." That was the only words I managed to say, I guess.

Even my cousin had gotten used to giving orders here, but she had to submit to my will because I was older and, consequently, more experienced at finding quick solutions in extreme situations like this. The thorny bushes cracked, and suddenly, my cousin's face turned pale.
"Snake! Snake!" she shouted, jumping off the spot as fast as she could.
"Come on! It's just a grass snake..." I giggled.
"They're not dangerous at all. You don't have to jump each time you see one, dear!"

Lena cast her scornful gaze in my direction and fell silent. We both remained quiet for a while, thinking about how to get out of here before nightfall, when our grandparents would start looking for us. The more we searched for the right path, the more our hesitation grew. So, we followed the last glimmers of the setting sun, trying to discover the promised trail that would lead us back home.

Nice! I think this path is supposed to be our last resort, isn't it? Lena put her right hand into her pocket and pulled out a sweet candy.

"Where's my share?" I asked her.

"It's not enough for myself, I guess. Now I'm going to enjoy this while you look for the right direction."

At that moment, she didn't seem as scary to me as she had a minute before. She settled on a nearby stump, unwrapped the candy, and put it into her mouth, beginning to suck on it.

"Mmm... Delicious."

I guess you like it so much, huh... I leaned against the nearby oak-tree trunk and remained silent. Less than anything, I didn't want to argue or try to prove my point to anyone at that moment.

"Sereja, Lena!" a familiar voice called out, echoing through the woods.

"Are you there?"

"Grandpa!!!" we both shouted in unison, then dashed toward the source of the familiar voice. Our feet seemed to lift us off the ground, so happy we felt in that

moment. Our sudden joy was so overwhelming that it seemed to make the whole world pause and contemplate it!
We both ran up to him, giving him a double hug simultaneously. Grandpa's cheeks were filled with tears. "Finally... I thought I lost you forever..." he said, often speaking like this when overwhelmed or nervous. He embraced us as tightly as he could, and despite his outward appearance, it was clear that he had endured many difficult times—bad expectations he had managed to outlive—until he finally got us back.
"Oh my gosh, kids! You really scared me with your silly games. Was it Lena's idea for you both to get lost in the woods? I guess it was hers." He looked at my cousin incredulously and waved his hand. She stared at him defensively, innocent as ever, not understanding why all the shame for this little tricky game was going to be on her. "Come on! I guess grandma can't wait to see you both alive."
When we got home, there was a generous portion of honey mushrooms placed on the bright tablecloth, steaming softly and filling the room with their aroma.

14

The fall was near, and each of its blows was approaching our garden, making the leaves more yellow and trembling. Since the morning, my grandpa's loyal dog had stayed beside the porch, barking at the wind. That day,

she seemed less lively than usual. My grandma spotted her beloved garden beds and watered them carefully. Lena put on her headphones and was fully immersed in her music, dancing along to the rhythm. She used to dance with her small casette player in her hands while doing nothing else.
My grandpa felt sad too. It seemed like the whole world was upset about the arrival of this sudden fall.
Later, it started raining, and we all gathered on our porch, carefully listening to the sound of the rain.
"It’s going to be longer than I expected," murmured Grandpa, taking off his cap. He always seemed thoughtful in those moments. His eyes often appeared more transparent, as if they reflected the whole sky from within. He embraced me and fixed his gaze on a nearby apple tree.
"This apple tree looks miraculous, doesn’t it? I guess our bed watering has been successfully postponed for a better time," he said, then turned back to me.
"Sereja, let’s play!" Lena just stopped dancing and approached me. Her eyes lit up with interest, and she smiled. "Let’s play hide and seek!" she blurted out instantly.
"No, thanks… There’s no place to hide except in the attic," I objected, feeling a bit annoyed. "Besides, our grandma wouldn’t be pleased with that kind of game, would she?"

"I guess you're right..." Lena left the porch and went into the dacha. She used to show me if she wasn't in the mood. I continued watching the rain.
"Don't leave her alone," Grandpa advised me. "And in the meantime, I'll give a hand to your Grandma."
"Ok... I will," I said, standing up and entering the dacha. Lena was sitting with her feet on the bed, reading her book, seemingly not paying any attention to me. She appeared to be a bit angry with me, but still, I held onto the hope that we might share some common interests to discuss.
"Are you reading the same book as yesterday?" I asked, trying to smooth over my earlier ignorance and reach out to her.

"What?" she looked at me indifferently. "What do you want?"

I felt confused, struggling to find the right words to rebuild our recently broken friendship.
"Nothing... How about we play hide and seek?"

She suddenly jumped up, and her eyes lit up again.
"Great! When do we start?"

"Now," I replied, smiling, feeling happy and eager to play.

We were standing at the bus stop, waiting for our bus to get back home. The last days of summer felt especially sad and brilliant, filled with transparent air and yellow leaves that fell from their branches, making their last reverences in their beautiful waltz. There were several cottagers waiting for the last bus. It always tended to be late, which made all of us standing there nervous.
From time to time, some of them were looking at their baskets and backpacks, as if checking that all their fruits and mushrooms were in their places. My grandpa was engaged in a conversation with his neighbor, discussing the latest news he had listened to on the radio, while our grandma happily talked with another old lady about some garden issues. Everyone looked happy.
Lena and I stood up quietly, contemplating this mesmerizing scene. Finally, the battered old bus appeared on the horizon, mooing and rolling from side to side like an old bear after winter hibernation. As the bus reached the stop and the doors swung open with a clang, the most prompt cottagers dashed forward, eager to storm the bus and claim better seats near the window. We squeezed in carefully, trying not to squash our freshly gathered fruits. The doors closed, and the bus moved forward. The old and familiar forests, which had already begun turning yellow, rushed past the window.
My grandparents managed to find their seats and, holding each other's hands, kept talking about something very important—something only they knew. My cousin was holding a handrail, feeling sad that she hadn’t

managed to find a seat for herself. I was thinking about how quickly time had passed, taking this summer sun away from us.
Yes… Time was passing by, and the melody of happy days was filling my ears more and more intensely. I began to think that our old bus was suddenly lifting off the ground, soaring above the yellow forests, higher and higher…
Where to? The interior of the bus started filling with a blue hue, as if we were about to land in a vast, clear ocean teeming with countless small and enormous fishes…
Suddenly, it began to rain heavily, as only the sky could pour down. The raindrops flooded the interior, and all the passengers started to drown in this sky's cry. I dashed towards my grandparents, trying to save them, while tightly holding my cousin's hand in mine, making our way forward through the chaos.
"Grandpa, Grandma, we are here!" I cried out, trying to make them see us. But instead of their faces, two hundred raindrops responded in reply. I felt my face be covered with these drops, as if I were crying over my helplessness in the face of this universal flood…
Then I saw the trees, which normally stood tall, shrinking into tiny wooden toys in my hands—like little figurines. Our dacha was also right there, nestled in my palm, along with our little dog running after the bus in midair…
The Volga River seemed to be behind the window, getting closer and closer, trying to embrace this chaos.

Suddenly, the front door opened, and our grandparents, holding each other's hands, stepped off the bus, managing to wave us goodbye with their hands. I refused to believe what I was seeing.
But the leaves from those tiny wooden trees kept swirling and filling the bus with their dance, while the raindrops only strengthened their streams...
"What is going on?"

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I opened my eyes... They were filled with tears. Even my cushion was wet. That was a sunny morning outside.
I knew I had to call my cousin Lena and tell her about my dream, sharing this strange and vivid journey with her, as if her voice could make sense of the chaos inside my mind.
Unfortunately, I couldn't share this dream with my grandparents. I hope they are still happily married somewhere in Heaven, watching over us with their gentle love.